Debate over charter schools heats up in Michigan

By Tim Anderson

The Michigan Legislature finished its work in 1999 with a much-publicized battle over charter schools. In the end, Gov. John Engler did not get what he lobbied for: raising the current state cap on university-authorized public school academies.

Charter school proponents, though, believe the defeat is only temporary, and are promising action this year that will lead to more publicly funded, independently run academies.

"There will be a solution and something adopted in 2000," says Sen. Loren Bennett, a Republican from Canton Township, who is chair of the Education Committee. "Right now we've got to let the dust settle and start looking at ways to compromise. But the taxpayers and parents have shown that they want more charter schools. It wouldn't make any sense to ignore that."

Considered a national leader in the charter school movement, Michigan currently has 173 charter schools operating in the state, most of which are overseen by public universities. Engler proposed moving the state cap — which only applies to university-authorized charter schools — from 150 to 200 this fall and then raising it by 25 each ensuing year.

His proposal was defeated late last year in the Michigan House, whose members expressed concern about the oversight and the effectiveness of charter schools and their effect on traditional public school districts.

"The charters are supposed to have unique teaching methods that are substantially different from the public schools, but what we are seeing for the most part is that the university-sponsored schools are really just cookie-cutter schools draining money from the public schools," says Rep. Rose Bogardus, a Democrat from Davison, who serves as minority vice-chair of the Education Committee.

Bogardus agrees that the issue will likely resurface in 2000. She believes Engler will push for charter schools in his 2000-2001 budget. As a result, public schools are left with fewer state dollars and a higher percentage of students who are more difficult and costly to instruct, she adds.

"I think there's a place for charters, but the programs they offer should be new and innovative, and they can't take resources from the public schools," Bogardus states.

In many cases, the schools hire private management companies, whose functions can be as limited as handling staff payroll and benefits or as wide-ranging as developing plans and goals for the school. According to a January 1999 report by Western Michigan University, some management companies have been involved in the selection of charter school board members and have even sought out communities to "host" their public school academies.

Bogardus claims the only real winners in the rise of charter schools have been the management companies who have made a profit at the expense of public school districts. Bennett, though, disputes that notion and believes the new academies have had a positive effect on traditional public schools.

"I hear all the time that charter schools don't have to follow the same rules and regulations as public schools. This is absolutely and positively false," he says.

"I think a lot of the quarrels about charters are coming from the unions and some administrators. An awful lot of rank-and-file teachers say, 'I can compete with anyone if I am given the resources.' And what we're seeing is that the competition from charters is causing administrators to provide those resources to teachers."

Engler believes charter schools can be used to meet some of the state's most pressing educational needs. As part of his plan to increase the number of charter schools, Engler unveiled a proposal allowing day-care centers at businesses to become charter schools. "The proposal would allow priority to be given to children of employees but would require a certain ratio of community students to enroll," the governor states.

He also called for the creation of public school academies geared specifically toward at-risk youths.

But Bogardus says: "There's nothing preventing anybody from starting a charter school for at-risk students. The reason we don't see any of them is because of things like special programs and student-to-teacher ratios that would be needed to teach them. The management companies don't think they could make money on that kind of school."

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Year in Preview

Charter schools on the rise

The number of public school academies in Michigan has increased every year.

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<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Charter schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>1999-2000</td>
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Source: Michigan Association of Public School Academies

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Rep. Rose Bogardus Michigan

"Possibly the only difference is that the parents who decide to send their children are more involved in their kids' lives and more interested in the educational process," Bennett adds. "If they're more committed to the process, then their children will probably be too. I can't understand the argument that sacrifices the children of these parents, just because others choose not to make the same effort."

Sen. Loren Bennett Michigan

Noting the lottery system used to admit children, Bennett says charter schools do not choose their students and face the same state requirements as traditional public schools.

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Future of charter schools

Michigan's charter schools can be authorized by local school boards, intermediate school boards, community colleges or state universities. Instead of an elected school board, an appointed board of directors governs the charter school.

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Stateline

January 2000

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Two sides to issue

Bennett and Bogardus give poignant examples for their sides of the debate. When a charter school in Pontiac held its lottery to see which students would attend the academy, Bennett recalls, parents outside the school grounds were seen praying for their child to be selected.

"People are stepping up and saying they want out of the their local school districts, particularly in the urban schools," Bennett says. "There are probably a dozen reasons why. I just know the demand for charters is quite obviously there."

Bogardus counters with a story about the same area, where she says 44 students were expelled from a charter school in one year and sent back to the local school district. Around the state, most charters are simply using the same curriculum as normal school districts and choosing which children to teach, she says.

As a result, public schools are left with fewer state dollars and a higher percentage of students who are more difficult and costly to instruct, she adds.

"I think there's a place for charters, but the programs they offer should be new and innovative, and they can't take resources from the public schools," Bogardus states.